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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the connection between self-disclosure and stages in development of interpersonal relationships. It hypothesized that self-disclosure in relationships is of a dynamic character which works in two directions: towards the interaction partner, and in the opposite direction. The study proposed three stages in the development of interpersonal relationships: (1) acquaintance; (2) "good friends"; and (3) best friends. It examined 70 juniors in high school, about 17 years of age, and used the self-disclosure questionnaire consisting of 60 statements in the following possible categories of conversation: (1) attitudes; (2) interests; (3) work or studies; (4) money; (5) body; and (6) health. The study found that the breadth and depth of self-disclosure is in proportion to the stage of development of the interpersonal relationship. Subjects were most open and forthcoming in the categories of interests, learning at school, and attitudes, possibly because revealing information to a partner concerning these areas was more external and therefore more easily revealed. The subjects were less open and forthcoming about personality, body, and health, perhaps because these areas were more deeply rooted in self-knowledge and therefore more difficult to reveal. Also, in contacts with strangers, the level of self-disclosure in male subjects was significantly higher than in female subjects, indicating that girls are more selective when choosing a partner for self-disclosure. (Contains 12 references.) (SD)

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SELF - DISCLOSURE IN YOUTH AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

ED 403 997

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Abstract

According to the theory of social penetration (I. Altman, D. Taylor 1978), the phenomenon of self - disclosure in interpersonal relationships is of a dynamic and developmental character. One can apply here the well - known metaphor which compares human personality with an onion consisting of many peels protecting the core - the true „I". There is also another metaphor describing the „opening up" of partners, parallel to this interpretation of human personality, structuralized in terms of „coats" that can be taken off an onion. The opening up would be in that case a kind of „struggling" through successive „peels" of the partner, not only in order to reach his „core", but also vice - versa: to allow our partner to penetrate our interior. Therefore, self - disclosure „works" in two directions: towards the interaction partner, and in the opposit direction.

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Aim of research

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the connection between self - disclosure and stages in development of interpersonal relationships. We use the theory of staging development of interpersonal relationships (Levinger and Snouk, 1972) which is a certain variant of the theory of social penetration, as a basis for furher consideration. These authors have distinguished three stages in development of interpersonal relationships i their conception:

a) stage of awareness,

b) stage of superficial contacts,

c) stage of reciprocity.

These stages represent the dynamic and developmental aspects of interpersonal relationships. Every lower stage is a basis for the occurrence and development of the higher stage. For the benefit of this research and for use in this paper we also propose to distinguish three stages in the development of interpersonal relationships:

1) stage of acquaintance,

2) stage of „good friends",

3) stage of the best friends.

Research method and characteristics of the sample examined

The technique used in this study was the „Self - Disclosure Questionnaire" (Jourard, 1971). This questionnaire consists of 60 statements concerning 6 categories of matters which different persons may like to talk about. These persons are called Target Persons (TP). The talks between subjects and Target Persons concern for the most part the following categories of topics: a) attitudes, b) interests, c) work or studies, d) money, e) body, f) health.

Since Jourard's questionnaire was broadly characterized in publications devoted to those kinds of problems, we shall not describe it here in greater detail.

The sample used in this study consisted of 70 (35 male and 35 female) 3 - rd grade juniors from one of the secondary schools in Lodz. The mean age of the juniors was about 17. The selection of respondents was not random. When choosing the respondents in the age of adolescence, we took into account the fact that during this period telations based on friendship and comradeship play an especially important role and, on the other hand, self - disclosure in youth of this age is significantly greater than among adults. According to E. Hurlock (1985) juniors of that age have a particularly strong need of „possessing" someone close to him/her to whom he/she can „open up". Therefore, using the juniors at the age of 17 as our sample, we can relatively easily exeplify the problem we are interested in.

Results

In order to assess the level of self - disclosure among the examined youth at subsequent stages of development of interpersonal relationships, we assumed that a given level of self - disclosure represents the degree to which the subject reveals all categories of information comprised in Jourard's questionnaire, to the patrner of interaction (TP).

We divided the subject into three classes, and distinguished three levels of self - disclosure: low, medium, and high. Scores ranging from 0 to 40 represent a low level of self - disclosure. Analogusly, the scores ranging from 41 to 80 represent a medium level, and those from 81 to 120 - a high one.

As concerns the selectivity of self - disclosure, we assume that a „high selective" person is a person who opens up to no more than two other persons (with regard to the categories of topics taken into account by us). Analogously, a „medium selective" person is a person who opens up to 3 or 4 persons, and a person with „low selectivity" one who opens to 5 or 6 other persons.

The obtained results are presented subsequently in tables: 1, 2 and 3. The data included in table 1 suggest that the level of self - disclosure in the subjecys clearly depends on given stage of development of interpersonal relationships. For example: at the stage of friendship, the level of self - disclosure is significaly

higher, than at the stage of comradeship (good friend). The obtained data indicate that a significant number of male and female juniors can be characterized with a high or medium level of self - disclosure at the stage of friendship, and with low or medium at the comradeship stage.

Self - disclosure among persons at the stage of acquaintnce is characterized for the most part with a low level and only in a few cases with a medium one. The data presented in table 1 completely confirm the hypothesis expressed at the begining of this paper, maintaining that the higher the stage of development of interpersonal relationships, the more often persons open up to others. Differences between the levels of self - disclosure are for the most part significant ($p < .05$).

table 1

Breadth of self - disclosure

By „breadth" of self - disclosure we mean the number of categories of topics in which the subject open up to the Target Persons. These categories can be divided into two groups. The 1- st group of topics concerns the relationship „I" - the world", and the 2 - nd one concerns the topics of intimate character.

In the first group, we consider information connected with attitudes towards: life, world outlook, religion, interests, and work or studies.

Matters connected with personality, money, body and health belong to the second group. These elements of self - knowledge, belonging to the last group (more intimate) can be considered more „confidential" than matters belonging to the first one „ I - the world".

In the assessment of the results we assume that the self - disclosure of the subjects opening up to the interaction partner in 5 - 6 categories of topics is of great breadth. Medium - breadth characterizes persons who open up to TP in not more than 3 - 4 categories of topics, and a small degree of breadth characterizes subject who open up to TP in 1 - 2 categories of topics. The obtained results who presented in table 2.

table 2

From the data in table 2 we can conclude that the breadth of self - disclosure is in proportion to the stage of development of a given interpersonal relationship. This regularity was equally distinctively marked both in male and female subjects, which is characteristicaly both of frienship and comradeship. As regards the stage of acquaintance, the regularity is quite the opposite. The majority of the subjects opened up to TP in few categories of topics.

It is worth notig that as far as the stage of friendship and comradeship are concerned, there are no significant differences connected with the sex of the subjects. On the other hand, at the stage of acquqintance differences connected with sex were somewhat more pronounced in favour of boys. These differences were significant at the level $p < .05$.

Depth of self - disclosure

Assessing the depth of self - disclosure we take into account the degree to which the above mentioned topics are exhausted during talks with Target Persons.

table 3

Scores ranging from 0 to 233 are defined as low by us.

Analogously, scores ranging from 234 to 465 are considered average, and those ranging from 466 to 700 as high. The global score (e.g. for females, in one of the categories of topics concerning intimate matters) is the sum of scores gained by 35 female respondents.

The findings in table 3 prove that the stage of development of interpersonal relationships is of essential importance for the depth of self - disclosure. This phenomenon is almost independent of the sex of respondents. The only difference is, that girls in their confidental talks differentiate more distinctively between „regular" acquaintances and relationships based on the so - called „reciprocity" of interaction partners. As concerns boys, this difference is somewhat less pronounced but not to such an extent as to be statistically significant. On the one hand, this may indicate that boys are more „direct" in interpersonal contacts, but it may also prove that they are less responsible for the revealed opinions, on the other hand. Therefore, we can conclude that girls, probably more than boys, control what they say to the persons with whom they are at the stage of acquaintance. As regards the total depth of self - disclosure in the examined juniors the tendency to open up in topics concerning interests seems to be the most pronounced one, which is characteristic both for boys and girls. This may indicate that categories of topics from the range of interests do not belong to the sphere of matters which can threaten the individual. That is why the subject willingly speak about them.

The category of topics concerning work (or studies) ranks second. The obtained results prove that girls more willingly than boys share their opinions about the progress in their studies or lerning. This regularity is characteristic for contacts with both male and female friends. It is likely that girls are general-

ly more diligent than boys in fulfilling their school duties and, therefore, they more willingly talk about them.

As to the categories of topics about which young people do not so willingly talk about, we should mention in the first place money, and next personality, body and health. The scores in these categories for the most part belong to the range of low self - disclosure. This regularity seems to be independent both of the kind of interpersonal relationship (the stage of its development), and of the sex of subjects.

Discussion

The present study confirmed the fact that in human beings there exists, among others, the need of self - disclosure which can be expressed in terms of passing on information about him/her to the Target Persons. In the examined sample which comprised youth at the age of adolescence, the above mentioned need was pronounced very distinctively. The fulfillment of this need occurs during the process of direct interactions with the partner. The findings of this study pointed out that both for boys and girls, the need for self - disclosure was fulfilled for the most part in interactions with the best friend. The high level of self - disclosure in the relationship with the best friend, as well as the high level

of its breadth and depth may confirm the latter conclusion. These findings are also consistent with the results of our past research

(Niebrzydowski, 1983), which pointed out that the best friend of the same sex is the most important interaction partner for youth at the age of adolescence. This study also proved that the need for

self - disclosure is much less fulfilled in interactions with a good friend (colleague).

During the interactions with colleagues, adolescents pass on to their peers information (about e.g. body) only of a superficial character and in a much narrower range. The tentative question that one may ask in reference to the above mentioned problem is: „Why is the level of self - disclosure higher at the stage of friendship than at the stage of comradeship ?" The analysis of the data obtained in this study leads to the conclusion that the stage of friendship provides the partners with an opportunity for more profound fulfillment of the most essential and intimate needs. That is because at the stage of the best frienship the mutual understanding of the partners is much more pronounced. This conclusion was confirmed by the research of La Gaipa (1980), as well, as that of Hurlock (1985), who concluded that the most important reason for establishing friendly terms between the interaction partners is the need of „having" someone „close", to whom the individual can open up.

An individual has specific expectations towards his/her friend. Among these expectations, the most important are those that provide a real oppotunity or at least a hope of self - disclosing. Comradeship is, as it was mentioned above, the lower stage of development of interpersonal relationships. Hence, different expectations towards the interaction partner are characteristic of this stage. The comrade is a person eager to cooperate and help as well, but at this stage of development of interpersoanl relationship full disclosure should not be expected.

The other interesting problem which may arise is whether, besides specific expectations towards the interaction partner, there are also some characteristic attributes of the friend`s personality which facilitate self - disclosure. Answering this question we should mention the research of Lis - Turlejska (1976), who concluded that in the majority of cases the cognitice structures of friends are similar to each other. According to Lis - Turlejska, this similitude facilitates the process of communication with the partner, which in turn causes their mutual contacts to be of considerable rewarding value.

Because self - disclosure is a sub - class of verbal communication (Derlega, Chaikin, 1972), we can assume that this cognitive similitude of friends facilitates the partners` revealing information about themselves also of an intimate character. Perhaps that is why a friend is more rewarding than a comrade.

Our research leads also to some other conclusions concerning the specificity of the self - disclosure phenomenon at different stages of development of interpersonal relationships in subjects of both sexes. It turned out that at the stgae of friendhip and at the stage of comradeship, girls are more self - disclosed than boys. This findings may confirm the hypothesis of the American psychologist (Jourard, 1971) dealing with the influence of sex on self - disclosure. As it is known - both in female adolescents and in women the need of establishing intimate relationship is somewhat more pronounced than in male adolescents and in men. This is likely because upo - bringing traditions and specific expectations concerning the male role, cause that the need for self - disclosure in boys is, to some extent, diminished, beginning from the earliest years of their life.

In comparison with what was mentined above it may be surprising that in contacts with strangers the level of self - disclosure in male subjects was significantly higher than in female subjects. Also, at the stage of acquaintance boys pass on more intimate information than girls do (Niebrzydowski ,1983, 1985). These findings seem to allow one to draw the conclusion that girls are more selective while choosing the partner for self - disclosure. Thus, their requirements are higher than the requirements of boys. The small likehood of repeated meeting with a stranger facilitates, to a greater extent in boys than in girls, the passing on of intimate information (Niebrzydowski, 1994).

This research also pointed out that the subjects like to open up, to the greatest extent, in the following categories of topics: interests, learning at school, attitudes; and less as concerns: personality, body and health which seem to be of a more intimate character. This regularity is characteristic for all stages of development of interpersonal relationships we were dealing with.

Finally, one can also ask a question connected with the latter problem: „Why are the categories reffering to interests, school learning (or studies), and attitudes revealed more willingly than those concerning personality, or body and health ?

One of the tentative answers can be (according to Skarżyńska) that information revealed to the partners during the process of interpersonal communication belongs to the system of human self - knowledge. This system is of laminar structure. Some elements of it are more external and, therefore, can be revealed more easily to the partner: the others are more deep - seated inside the system of self - knowledge, and that is why revealing of them is more difficult (Skarżyńska, 1979).

The subjects of our interests, attitudes, problems of work or studies are inside of us, as well as in the world surrounding us, and in external relationships with other people. That may be why these elements of self - knowledge are more easy to reveal and we disclose them more eagerly.

On the other hand, problems of personality, body and health are more inner and belong to our most intimate world. Therefore, maybe for fear of losing the sense of self - identity, and our unique „I", the problems of this kind are never fully revealed.

Table 1.

Level of self- disclosure in subjects at different stages of interactions

Sex	Level of Self-Disclosure	Stages of Development of Interpersonal Relationships		
		Friendship	Comradeship	Acquaintance
Females	High	16	5	0
	Average	16	15	1
	Low	3	15	34
Males	High	7	1	0
	Average	22	20	4
	Low	6	14	31

Table 2.
Breadth of Self- Disclosure at Diferent Stages of Interactions

Sex	Range of Self-Disclosure Breadth	Stages of Development of Interpersonal Relationships		
		Friendship	Comradeship	Acquaintance
Females	High	35	33	5
	Average	0	2	16
	Low	0	0	14
Males	High	35	31	17
	Average	0	4	10
	Low	0	0	8

Table 3.

Range of Self- Disclosure Depth

Sex	Stages of Development of Interperso-nal Relation-ships	DIMENSIONS											
		ATTI TUD ES	Verbal estimate of the score	INTE REST S	Verbal estimate of the score	SCHOOL LE-ARNING	Verbal estimate of the score	MONEY	Verbal estimate of the score	PERSON ALITY	Verbal estimate of the score	BODY-HEALTH	Verbal estimate of the score
FEM ALES	Friendship	464	Average	554	High	533	High	332	Average	472	High	436	
	Comradeship	329	Average	367	Average	340	Average	184	Low	219	Low	284	Average
	Acquaintance	82	Low	233	Low	97	Low	20	Low	17	Low	42	Low
MAL ES	Friendship	405	Average	480	High	430	Average	317	Average	322	Average	275	Average
	Comradeship	320	Average	386	Average	317	Average	230	Low	185	Low	179	Low
	Acquaintance	107	Low	190	Low	119	Low	82	Low	50	Low	54	Low

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